**Eleven Thousand Virgins[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**--A Puerto Rican Legend of 1797**

by Cayetano Coll y Toste (b. 1850 - d. 1930)

In the year of 1797 when the pirates commanding their ships, had taken over the seas, there lived an English general called Sir Ralph Abercromby. Abercromby had sailed to the Caribbean Sea with a fleet of more than seventy ships and an army of 14,000 soldiers. When he arrived he easily conquered the island of Trinidad and encouraged by his success, proposed to conquer more territory for England. He set out for Puerto Rico the beautiful Spanish colony and that same year he anchored his ships in front of the *Boca de Congrejeros*, near San Juan, the capital of the island.

Don Ramón de Castro, the Governor of Puerto Rico at that time, surprised by the sudden appearance of the warships, feared a formidable attack and so put his troops in a state of alert. They made preparations to defend the city. They blocked the San Antonio bridge, the only land access to the capital. Groups of canon boat batteries circled the walled city. They sent mounted patrols through the surrounding countryside to avoid being sacked by the enemy. Finally, they ordered women, children and the elderly to evacuate the city. Only strong men remained to defend San Juan. Bishop Trespalacios who then ruled the archdiocese helped the governor not only raise money, but also made church personnel available to him on the front to fight. Here the cross and the sword were united to combat an enemy.

It was impossible to avoid the landing of the English troops because the anchored ships bombed the beaches with shrapnel that permitted hundreds of boats to bring the mercenaries to shore. General Abercromby located his headquarters very close to the city. Encouraged by his good location he continued to the San Antonio bridge. Abercromby was cut off by Fort Geronimo and so the English army remained in Miramar and el Condado. He then began an intense battle. The fire of the English canons was fierce and sustained, but the city did not surrender. For twelve days and twelve nights the struggle continued making chaos and destruction but the English could not triumph.

On the thirteenth day, the Diocese Judge spoke to the Bishop. “Illustrious Bishop, the troops defending the city are very tired their number is much less than the English and they are afraid the city will succumb” he said. “In this situation only a miracle will save us. Why don’t we organize a procession to implore help from heaven above?”

“That sounds like a great idea,” answered Bishop Trespalacios. “We will have a procession in honor of Santa Catalina for it is her saint’s day, and for Saint Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins, to whom I am especially devoted.”

It was decided that the city would participate in a magnificent event. They called for the participation of all the churches, rich and poor, peasants, soldiers and clergy would all carry candles and lighted torches in a procession led by the Bishop, the city ecclesiastical leaders, city authorities. They would leave the Cathedral and run through the streets of the capital all through the night. At the crack of dawn they would return to the Cathedral to celebrate a mass sung with the accompaniment of the orchestra.

In this way late on the thirteenth day as the sun was setting they began the long procession. The English spies noticed unusual movement in the city. They heard a mysterious choir of bells that rang out strongly and incessantly. They also observed numerous lights that were moving to the West. Worried, the troops alerted General Abercromby.

“They are receiving back up troops from the field” said Abercromby. “Our frigates at the entrance to the port can’t get close enough because of the incessant bombing from the batteries of the great fort that protects San Juan Bay.” “Increase our offensive in Miramar and Condado!” he ordered.

The orders of the general were followed and for three hours the English offense intensified. At midnight a sentinel returned to speak with the general.

“The lights in the city are multiplying and now it seems they are coming toward us!” said the sentinel.

The general called all his senior officers together. “We have been struggling for a very long time without advancing an inch. The defense of the city does not appear to have been debilitated. The water that we have is very bad and dysentery is weakening our troops. It appears that reinforcements from the field have helped the city. I believe that the moment has arrived for us to retreat and give orders to return to the ships.” The officers were in unanimous agreement and made the final decision. The morning of May 1st the siege was lifted.

Meanwhile, the singing mass took place in the Cathedral. Later all the voices sung the hymn Te Deum in unison, and the Bishop gave a long sermon. Those who were there swear that the victory was due to the intervention of Saint Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins. They affirm that on that memorable night of prayers and hope, the English canons shot more bullets than ever, bullets that never arrived to their destination, but mysteriously turned against the assailants. They say that when the long procession of priests, soldiers and peasants that were carrying candles and lighted torches finally entered the cathedral the bombardment stopped and the English disappeared.

Some say that it was the tenacity and experience of the small Spanish troop that saved the city. Others, that is was the bravery and loyalty of the unending wave of armed peasants that aided the city. However, there are those who fervently believe that it was the intervention of Saint Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins.

1. Based on the adaptation of Cayetano Coll y Toste’s version in *Leyendas y tradiciones puertorriqueñas*, Puerto Rico, Editorial Cultural, 1975 [orig. 1924-1925] (Translated by Sally Everson from *De oro y esmeralda*: *mitos, leyendas y cuentos populares de latinoamérica.* Lulu Delacre. Scholastic, 1996: 14-19). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)